

Introduction

In the first days of October, 2016, the 6th international conference of the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism took place at the University of Tartu, in Tartu, Estonia. In a number of ways, the conference was extraordinary, unprecedented. The initial conferences of the Chinese-founded AELC were organized in China, while the 5th conference, the first beyond Chinese borders, was held in Seoul Dongguk University, in 2015. Thus, ethical literary criticism, a new (or at least envisaged as a renewed) current in literary criticism – centered on questions related to ethics, or morals – for the first time moved out from Asia, to the West’s “regained periphery” in the Eastern Baltics.

The conference in Tartu was organized jointly by the IAELC and the EACL (Estonian Association of Comparative Literature) with the general title “Comparative Literature, World Literature and Ethical Literary Criticism”. With more than eighty participants from the East and West, it was the biggest ever international conference in the field of literary research held in Estonia and certainly the first conference in humanities at which Estonia hosted more than forty Chinese and more than a dozen South-Korean literary scholars. One would say, a great intent in a small country towards a break-through of a dialogue on the East-West bridge!

In the present and the next issue of *Interlitteraria* we will gather a selection of articles based on the papers of the above said conference. A reader who expects to find a coherent “unified” position as respects ethics in literature, especially in the context of the present day’s conflicting socio-economic and political developments in the whole world, might feel disappointed. There were few papers whose authors could have dared and were prepared to discuss the broader spectrum of interrelations between comparative literature, world literature and the renewed “ethical turn”. On the one hand, though everybody seems to understand in principle the importance to relate, for instance, the processes going on in “centric” (big) and “peripheral” (smaller and small) linguistic-cultural areas, the “own” and the “other”, in practice there is still a great gap between the majority of scholars specializing exclusively in one’s “own” area, strongly conditioned by some kind of monolingualism, and the tiny minority of comparative literature researchers. On the other hand, during the last forty years (the era of “institutionalized postmodernism”) the ethical nucleus in literary creation has remained somewhat obfuscated and alienated (if not entirely paralyzed) in Western criticism. In times of a deepening commercial globalization, the tendency has had its almost inevitable repercussion in the East).

Nonetheless, the articles resulting from our conference (and some more, in the same line) should vividly testify that contrary to the postmodern trend in criticism and theory, the ethically minded image and discourse have not at all disappeared in the “primary” literary creation itself – either in poetry, narrative fiction, drama or other genres – in world literature. On the contrary, writers in its forefront, those capable of blending their existential wisdom with ever varying artistic forms and expression, continue to be immersed in search of a strong ethical nucleus for their work. It is high time for literary scholarship to follow their example. Comparative studies originating from different literary and academic cultures are an excellent means for doing so. Tackling world literature(s) from their various perspectives, they are a constant reminder of our own otherness in others’ eyes and a constant exploration of ways to make that mutual otherness work in favour of communication and understanding, not against it. Therein lies one of the main ethical challenges comparative literary scholarship is facing, and a major contribution it may have to bring to the domain of ethical discussions.

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